

5 Tips to Prepare Kids for Pandemic Back to School

Now is the time to start preparing our children for a back-to-school routine, especially since that routine may look different than it has in years past. Here are five tips to help make the transition back to school a smooth one:

1. Make sure children are going to bed early enough and have a morning routine. “Even if the school schedule is different this year, having a routine is helpful,” said Patricia Bates, a family life educator at Avera McKennan Hospital & University Health Center.
2. Start preparing children for the idea that school may look a little different this year, and that these changes are to keep everyone safe and healthy. “Children should know it’s possible schools may have to close again. If they are prepared for changes or adjustments in their schedule, they can cope better,” Bates said.
3. Be honest and open. Even if you haven’t discussed the pandemic a lot, your children may have overheard things and may not have accurate information. It is okay to tell them that you don’t know or that you wonder the same thing.
4. Use these conversations as an opportunity to check in with your children about any fear and anxiety they may be experiencing. Ask them what they are looking forward to about going back to school – or what makes them nervous. Be prepared for them to have some strong feelings about the return to school – and help normalize them. “The more we help normalize these big feelings, the more resilient children will be when they experience them,” Bates said.

Not sure where to start? Avera has education on [how to talk with children about COVID-19](https://www.averya.org/covid-19) available at [Avera.org/covid-19](https://www.averya.org/covid-19).

5. Model good habits for your children, including good hand hygiene, covering coughs and sneezes, staying home if you don’t feel well and wearing face masks in public. “Especially for little kids, it is a good idea to start wearing masks,” said Kara Bruning, MD, Clinical Vice President for the Avera Pediatrics Service Line.



“Make or get some fun masks if your school, preschool or daycare is going to require them. If kids are exposed to them early, it won’t be a shock to wear them all day. Model this behavior when you are going out – or just practice doing it at home.”

For younger children, Bates offers several ideas for hands-on learning to supplement modeling good habits:

- Put flour on your child’s hands and show them how it settles into the cracks and creases of our hands; explain that this is what germs do, also, and why it is important to scrub carefully for 20 seconds when washing hands.
- Put glitter on your child’s hands and have them wash with just water to show them how much glitter stays on their hands. Then have them wash again with soap and show them how this gets the glitter off our hands. Explain that this how germs work, too, which is why we always should wash with soap and water.
- Teach children a song to sing while washing hands. The [PBS Kids website \(PBS.org\)](https://www.pbs.org) has some great resources, and there’s a handwashing song with Elmo called the “Washy Wash Song” that might be a good place to start.
- Get a water spray bottle and show children how far germs can spread if we don’t cover our sneezes. Pretend to sneeze and spray the water to show them how far the droplets can travel.

While there are still certainly unknowns about what the school year will hold, it’s important to be positive, Bruning said. “Kids are smart. They know when parents are stressed and worried, but if we do our best to present information in a positive manner, kids will be fine with it.”

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